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ABSTRACT

The paper identifies key attributes of syntopical theory as developed by Mortimer Adler, examines the status of the foundations of education, and discusses the importance of a national dialogue about foundational studies in teacher education and syntopical theory. People who work in disciplines embedded in the foundations of education lack a common body of ideas, knowledges, and languages for engaging in dialogue (with people inside and outside the field). Such a body of ideas is vital if groups of people are to access and acquire a positive orientation toward the conceptual and dispositional material which can be offered to teacher education students. The paper draws heavily upon Adler's development of "The Great Ideas: A Syntopicon of Great Books of the Western World." It is suggested that associates in the foundations of education form a committee for examining the nature of a syntopicon of foundational knowledge which would provide professional educators with a common knowledge base and language system. The committee would examine potentialities and values of such an instrument for anyone involved in teacher preparation, particularly in the foundations of education. (SM)

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SYNTOPICAL THEORY AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF EDUCATION

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Norman J. Bauer, Ed.D.
November 1, 1990

"... the hardest job in the world is to reformulate your own metaphor."[1]

"We need to raise the consciousness of each new generation of teachers to what is eternally problematic in their profession and in need of their persistent critical and creative attention."[2]

"The relevance of foundational study is perennial."[3]

Introduction

Two experiences of the writer, seemingly unrelated, occuring over extended periods of time, in quite different geographical locations, are singularly important if one is to understand the genesis of this paper. In the early sixties I had a curriculum course with a renowned curriculum theorist in Gregory Hall on the University of Illinois campus. During that course this theorist briefly exposed those in the course, in a not too complementary fashion, to the **Great Books of the Western World,**[4] a series of books which had been published a few years earlier. Just how thoroughly this professor had examined this set of books will never be known, but I do recall his arguing that these books could have little value to those of us in curriculum who were interested in curriculum theory and development which would have a significant reconstructive effect in our society. If my memory does not fail me his argument hinged on the notion that these books created, as Block has suggested, " ...the illusion of pure discourse. Divorced from partisan concerns, from political intersts and causes...."[5] Now, three decades later, I know that he was quite incorrect in his assessment, but more about that later.

During these decades, with the exception of an occasional piece, I cannot recall hearing or reading much from professional educators regarding the work and thought of Mortimer Adler, or about the set of the **Great Books of the Western World**, Volumes I *and* 4 through 54 , for which he was the Associate Editor, under the direction of the Editor in Chief, Robert Maynard Hutchins. Further, I have been unable able to find even one item in the professional literature which examines the nature of the two volumes in this series which were conceived and developed by Mr. Adler, who served as their Editor in Chief, Volumes 2 and 3, **The Great Ideas: A Syntopicon of Great Books of the Western World**. [6]

In the early eighties I became the owner of a set of the **Great Books of the Western World**. As with most of us when we acquire something new, ownership compelled me to examine these books in depth and with great care. This examination brought me into contact with *Volumes 2 and 3* of the fifty-four volume set, titled respectively, **THE GREAT IDEAS: A Syntopicon 1** and **THE GREAT IDEAS: A Syntopicon 11**.[7] Gradually, as I examined the contents of these two volumes, I became aware of the concept of 'syntopicon,' of the nature and function of **A Syntopicon 1** and **A Syntopicon 11**, of their construction, of their relationship to Volumes 4 - 54 of the **Great Books of the Western World**, of their organization, their use and their value. These and other significant attributes are what I shall refer to later in this paper as 'syntopical theory.'

The second experience, again one extending over several decades, is one which has involved me deeply as a professor in the Foundations of Education, as an active member and officer, currently the president, of the New York State Foundations of Education Association, and as a writer and lecturer on topics clearly allied with the Foundations of Education. During these decades, though more so during the past ten years than earlier, it has become increasingly clear to me that there is a wide range of difference among professors of the Foundations regarding the nature, purpose and content of foundational study, and an almost insurmountable gap both between those of us laboring in the vineyard of the Foundations and our pedagogical colleagues, as well as between us and our colleagues in the more traditional disciplines. Indeed, the latter usually have not the foggiest notion of the meaning of 'Foundations', with a barely perceptible improvement in the 'foggy' scale of many of our pedagogically oriented colleagues within teacher education. Our lack of a clear self-image of

what we are about has resulted in the acquisition of a very hazy perception by others of both our purposes and why we ought to be included as a significant component in all teacher preparation programs. This condition is exacerbated by the fact that frequently those of us deeply embedded in the field seem to lack a clear language for conversing with one another in what Bernstein would call "A true 'conversation' - ... an extended and open dialogue wich presupposes a background of intersubjective agreements and a tacit sense of relevance.[8]

These two experiences, now fused in my thought, have compelled me to develop this paper, the thesis of which is quite straightforward. Those of us who labor in, and are committed to, the disciplines embedded in the Foundations of Education, lack a common body of ideas, knowledges and languages with which to engage in dialogue, both with ourselves as well as with those outside our field of interest. Such a body of material is vitally needed if important groups of people, both on and off our campuses, are to have access to, and acquire a positive orientation toward, the conceptual and dispositional material which we can offer our teacher education students and which can justify our existence within teacher education programs. One way of coping with this profound and, I believe, ubiquitous problem, lies in our consideration of the value of syntopical theory and the potential of such theory to enable us to come to grips with this problem.

Purposes

This paper, then, has three main purposes: (1) to identify some key attributes of syntopical theory as developed almost soley by Mortimer J. Adler; (2) to examine the current status of the foundations of education; and (3) to accept the invitation of Tozer and his colleagues to participate in "... a national dialogue about foundational studies in teacher education"[9] by suggesting that syntopical theory would be a viable means for coping with the crisis of existence which is confronting the Foundations.

Attributes of syntopical theory

(Note: In the development of this section of the paper I have drawn heavily on two pieces of writing by Mortimer J. Adler, one found in each of the two volumes of the **Syntopicon**, found in the Reading Notes of this paper, titled respectively, "The nature of ..." and "The principles and methods of ..."[10]

Needless to say, we cannot, in the space of one paper, with the time allocated for its presentation and discussion, treat every dimension of syntopical theory as it developed under Adler's guidance. Our necessarily limited purpose will be, instead, to acquire an accurate insight into selected attributes of what I believe to be the more significant elements of this theory.

Initial insight

The fundamental idea regarding the theory behind the construction of a Syntopicon lies in what Adler referred to as an "extraordinary insight", the fact that when he read a great piece of literature with a particular purpose, or specific question in mind, he would discover something different "on pages that [he] had read many times before, and on which other passages were marked, not, however, the particular passage that now jumped out at me."[11] From this observation the idea grew that perhaps an index to the great books could be constructed around some great ideas, and "... for each idea of basic importance, [he] would assemble the references to relevant passages in the books? Such an index would provide a map or chart of the conversation about fundamental subjects in which the authors of the great books engaged with one another across the centuries."[12]

Great book and Period of greatness

A great book, according to this theory, is one which deals "... most fully and significantly with the great ideas, and ... the great ideas are those dealt with most fully and significantly in the great books."[13] It is one which "... deals in an important way with the great ideas of western thought....the great books are not merely monuments of our literary and cultural past, but also books of contemporary eminence ..."[14] The great books had to meet the test of time. The reason that the great books contain no works published in the twentieth century except for Freud's later works is not, according to Adler "... that no great books have been written in this century. Rather it is that not enough time has yet elapsed to give anyone the necessary detachment and perspective to decide which contemporary books belong with the great books of the past."[15]

Great ideas and Great writers

Great ideas, Adler urged, are "... not merely the vehicles of traditional thought, but also the notions which men must use today in thinking about contemporary realities."[16] One indication that an idea met the test of greatness was that it pervaded much, if not all, the tradition of the western world. Time, in other words, was a major criterion in determining whether an idea was great or not.

Great writers were perceived to be those people whose writing has been returned to time and again by each passing generation as people who have something significant to offer.

Because it requires the passage of much time to know if a writer meets the test of 'greatness', those who constructed the **Syntopicon** resisted including anyone from the twentieth century; though two, William James and Sigmund Freud, whose primary works were constructed prior to the twentieth century, were included as volumes 53 and 54.

Great conversation

Robert Maynard Hutchins, Editor in Chief of the **Great Books of the Western World,** argued in a compelling fashion that "The tradition of the West is embodied in the Great Conversation that began in the dawn of history and that continues to the present day....No other civilization," he stressed, "can claim that its defining characteristic is a *dialogue* of this sort.... The goal toward which Western Society moves is the civilization of the *dialogue* (italics added) ....Its dominant element is the logos. Nothing is to remain undiscussed. Everybody is to speak his mind. No proposition is to be left unexamined. The exchange of ideas is held to be the path to the realization of the potentialities of the race."[17]

Complimenting the view of Hutchins, Adler, the Associate Editor of all ofthese books except volumes 2 and 3, conceived of the 'great conversation' as based on the sense of meaning which perceived a "... conversation as a discussion of ideas by authors who, though spread across twenty-five hundred years of Western history, were talking to one another as if they were contemporaries..."[18] Some thinkers, particularly historians, because of their view which argues that ideas can be studied only in their historical context, as you might expect, seriously questioned Adler's conception of a 'conversation', dismissing it as "a fantastic illusion." Still, he persisted in his thinking, arguing that "... the main lines

of the continuous discussion that runs through the thirty centuries of western civilization ...[are] a great conversation across the ages... a living organism ..."[19]

Topics

"A topic," in syntopical theory, "is essentially a subject for discussion...a logical place...a place where minds meet to consider some common problem or theme."[20] It is "... a place where minds meet through being relevant to a common subject of discussion...."[21] A 'Syntopicon' then was perceived by Adler to be "... literally a collection of the topics which are the main themes of the conversation to be found in the books."[22] The Syntopicon was to be organized by a "... listing of the ideas that are significant common terms of discussion, and, then, by an enumeration of the topics that are the various particular points about which the discussion of each of these ideas revolves."[23]

Outline of topics under a great idea

"Under a great idea," Adler pointed out, "many different kinds of subjects are discussed, and these are represented by the various topics set forth in the Outline of Topics for each of the great ideas."[24]

The 'Outline of Topics" in **Syntopicon 1**for the idea ***Education*** looks like this:

1. The ends of education
   1*a*.. The ideal of the educated man
   1*b*. The disadvantages of being educated

2. The kinds of education: physical, moral, liberal, professional, religious

3. The training of the body and the cultivation of bodily skills: gymnastics, manual work

4. The formation of a good character, virtue, a right will
   - 4 *a.* The possibility and limits of moral education: knowledge and virtue
   - 4 *b.*. The influence of the family in moral training
   - 4 *c* . The role of the state in moral education: law, custom, public opinion
   - 4 *d* . The effect upon character of poetry, music, and other arts: the role of history and examples

5. The improvement of the mind by teaching and learning
   - 5 *a.* The profession of teaching: the relation of teacher and student
   - 5 *b.* The means and methods of teaching
   - 5 *c.* The nature of learning: its several modes
   - 5 *d.* The order of learning: the organization of the curriculum
   - 5 *e.* The emotional aspect of learning: pleasure, desire, interest
   - 5 *f.* Learning apart from teachers and books: the role of experience

6. The acquisition of techniques: preparation for the vocations, arts, and professions

7. Religious education
   - 7 *a.* God as teacher: divine revelation and inspiration
   - 7 *b.* The teaching function of the church, of priests and prophets

8. Education and the state
   - 8 *a.* The educational responsiblity of the family and the state
   - 8 *b.* The economic support of educational institutions
   - 8 *c.* The political regulation and censorship of education
   - 8 *d.* The training of the prince, the statesman, the citizen: aristocratic and democratic theories of education

9. Historical and biographical observations concerning the institutions and practices of education[25]

<u>Purpose and use of a Syntopicon</u>

The purpose of the Syntopicon was "...to guide the reading of the great books..."[26] "The specific type of inquiry which the Syntopicon is able to satisfy and which gives it its special character as a reference book,"according to Adler, "can be formulated by the question '*What do the great books have to say on this subject?*" (Italics in original)[27]

Value of a Syntopicon

A Syntopicon would be designed not only "... to help the reader who comes to [the Great Books] with inquiries on particular subjects.... if ... they raise further questions ... and excite him to further inquiries...they are more than answer books. They are pedagogues, leading the mind from question to question in the pursuit of learning. Reference books," such as the Syntopicon, Adler argued, "at their best perform an education function, not simply by answering questions, but by arousing and sustaining inquiry." [28]

Doctrinal control

One of the most serious concerns of Adler in constructing the Syntopicon was his deep concern with the avoidance of any sort of doctrine. He recognized the fact that the tradition of western thought, at different times, contained many different, often conflicting views. The Syntopicon, therefore, had to avoid, "... so far as that is humanly possible, any trace of systematic order. In no other way," Adler argued, "could it present the whole tradition free of prejudicial coloring by anyone of its parts."[29] He argued further for the construction of a Syntopicon which "... leaves the reader free to find, and even facilitates his finding, the various and often conflicting constructions that have been made in the tradition of the great books."[30]

The foregoing attributes represent the most significant elements of Adler's view of syntopical theory.

Current status of the Foundations of Education

Let us approach the second purpose of this paper by considering the image of what I believe should be communicated whenever the term 'Foundations of Education' is employed. This image should suggest the

study of the history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, politics, and economics of education, curriculum theory, learning theory and policy studies. The content of the 'Foundations' as I see it is both separate from and yet connected to such studies as general and specific methods, field experiences, and student teaching. At the same time it is what Shulman has called "... an integral part of the connective tissue that gives shape and meaning to the education of teachers - *as the framework for connecting and integrating the knowledge acquired in the liberal arts and sciences with the practice of pedagogy.*"[3] (Italics added)

With this image of the term ' Foundations' in mind, let me proceed at once to point out that this is not an image generally possessed either by my pedagogically oriented colleagues within teacher preparation or by liberal arts professors elsewhere on the campus. In the case of the former there has been a very noticeable erosion in their understanding of the importance of Foundational study in the preparation of prospective teachers, a phenomenon which is, on Sirotnik's view, "widespread, not new, and not abating."[32] Criticism and concern about Foundations courses can be traced to the work of Woodring in 1958 in which he concluded that "educational philosophy in America has fallen upon evil days ... [and that] because we have not given sufficient attention to philosophical problems, we are afraid to attempt to discriminate between the profound and the trivial or even to see that we must,"[33] and Conants study of teacher education in 1963 in which foundations courses were often viewed as 'eclectic', courses frequently described by students as 'pathetic'."[34] Such criticisms appear to have gained increased momentum during the PBTE, CBTE, CBE, Results oriented era which began to emerge during the mid-seventies and which has shown little sign of abatement during the last fifteen years. Indeed, during this period more and more pedagogically oriented teacher educators have been persuaded to accept the reductionistic, behavioristic line of argument that if something is not directly and immediately related to the learning of students it has little if any justification for inclusion in the preparatory programs of prospective teachers and administrators. That this is the case is evidenced by the failure of the Educational Testing Service in Princeton to include significant material from foundational studies in the National Teacher Examination and in the complete omission of foundational knowledge from any of the recently published materials emanating from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. At a recent Executive Board meeting of the New York State Association of Teacher

Educators, Dr. Richard Allan, a representative of National Evaluation Systems, Inc., a Boston firm, apprised those in attendance of the fact that in many recent encounters dealing with evaluation needs of teacher educators throughout the country he had not heard a single remark regarding the desire or need to incorporate Foundational knowledge in any assessment instrument.[35] In New York State it is evidenced by the almost total neglect of Foundational knowledge in all recent publications pertaining to the improvement of teacher education which have emanated from the New York State Education Department.

As a consequence, it has become increasingly difficult for well-intentioned teacher educators, most of whom are largely concerned with pedagogy, to understand the importance of what Broudy has called 'knowing with.' Embedded in 'knowing with' one finds two of Broudy's uses of knowledge, the *interpretive* use and the *associative* use of knowledge. When one interprets a situation one "is 'making sense' of a set of facts in terms of some context or larger setting, understanding the facts of the case because they can be related to other facts."[36] When one acquires knowledge via the associative route the learning "is recalled not by precise prespecified clues but by adventitious association and circumstance."[37]

Further, it has been hard, if not impossible, because of the narrow behavioristic,technological orientation many of these teacher educators have acquired during the past decade and a half, to sympathize with the notion that "to *know with* is," according to Broudy, "to comprehend with a point of view, a value scheme, a style of life. What we know *with* gives meaning to *what* we know."[38] Lucas adds that "long after the details of instruction have been forgotten, having had the experience of studying certain "disciplinary maps," a person comprehends something new differently than the person ignorant of those "maps." This context building is a form of "tacit" knowing, in which what is peripheral in consciousness gives meaning to what is at its focus."[39]

Clearly, the value of Foundational studies is being seriously questioned by many people connected in some way with the preparation of teachers and administrators. My position, however, is very much in line with the view of Sirotnik who argues that, "...foundational studies are absolutely central to pedagogical theory and practice." [40]

Syntopical theory and the crisis confronting the foundations of education

Is it possible for us to negotiate the difficult terrain in which we Foundations scholars find ourselves in a way which will both enhance the quality of preparation we provide prospective teachers and which will perpetuate the existence of Foundational study as a significant, perennial realm of conceptual thought into which students ought to be, in Peters term, 'initiated,' and for scholars to pursue? I believe it is, but only if we resolutely commit ourselves to the definition of precisely what it is we have to offer prospective educators and then act vigorously and persistently during the remaining years of the twentieth century to achieve that end.

How might be begin? We are all aware of the value of such publications as the **Handbook of Research on Teaching**[41] and the **Encyclopedia of Education Research**,[42] both Projects of the American Educational Research Association, and the recently published **Handbook of Research on Teacher Education**,[43] a Project of the National Association of Teacher Educators, to anyone engaged in the pursuit of inquiry in the various dimensions of educational theory and practice. These publications, reference books of the first magnitude, represent powerful synoptic efforts to bring together the thinking of the very best people to summarize the results of research from different perspectives.They do not, however, cover the entire spectrum of potential inquiry into matters related to educational theory and practice. Here is where our organization can make a substantive contribution.

The project I have in mind would complement these publications, adding an additional, enlarging dimension to our knowledge and our capability for tracing the evolution of significant ideas about education. It would be a project designed along the lines of a **Syntopicon.** Such a project would provide us with a significant pedagogical and educological tool, making a great range of authors and their subject matters available in our teaching and our research. It would, though not identical, be similar in nature and in importance to the development of a **Concordance,** a reference instrument employed by theologians and religious leaders. Such a book, as many of us know, "... is an alphabetical index of the words in a book or a body of literature in which each occurence is presented in its immediate context. It is used primarily to

find something - perhaps a single saying that we may faintly remember or all that a single author has written about a given matter...The purpose of a concordance is to provide the user precise, efficient, and -if it is unabridged -comprehensive access to the literature covered."[44]

A **Syntopicon of Foundational Knowledge** would be of a similar sort. It would be an instrument of enormous value to professional educators, particularly to Foundations scholars, providing them with a tool which would give them a common knowledge base, a common language system, both essential for the adequate framing of their discourses.

As Soltis has so insightfully and cogently pointed out "... I think we can argue (and many have) that there also are persistent and *perennial educational questions* (Italics added) that are equally fundamental to the education of educators and that well-educated educators need to meet and wrestle with them and incorporate them into their consciousness throughout their whole careers if they are to be truly educated professionals. Some of these questions are: What are the aims of education? How do human beings learn? What is the relation of school to society? What knowledge is of most worth?"[45]

Specifically, here is what I propose:

I. That a committee of our associates be formed for the purpose of examining the nature of a **Syntopicon,** as well as the values and potentialities of such an instrument for anyone involved in the preparation of teachers, particularly for those laboring in the Foundations of Education. Mr. Adler might be invited to a meeting of the committee for the specific purpose of sharing his ideas about how such a project could be most effectively designed and implemented. .

2. That, provided our Association approves the project, three subsequent tasks be accomplished:

a. An editor in chief and an editorial board would have to be appointed.

b. This editorial board would have to (a) determine how the cannon which would constitute the books to be examined in constructing

the **Syntopicon** would be selected; and (b)how to identify the ideas (i.e. the problems) which would be used to guide the specialists in their examination of the books included in the canon. As Shulman has said quite clearly and accurately, "The best way to think about the foundations is as that set of *ideas* (italics added) and experiences through which we forge connections between what students learned in the arts and sciences and the pedagogy that they are going to be learning with us."[46]

c. Specialists in each of the sub-disciplines comprising the Foundations of Education would need to be identified and requested to participate in identifying the passages related to the ideas found in those books in the canon related to their specialization.

Beyond this point it becomes difficult to anticipate what would need to follow. It is clear, though, that some modification of the theory employed by Adler in constructing his two-volume syntopicon would have to occur. This would pertain particularly to the criteria employed in identifying a great writer in the Foundations of Education. While it is true that a number of the classical thinkers undoubtedly would find their way into the list, it also remains clear that, because of the relative infancy of the discipline of education, and even more so of the Foundations of Education, these criteria, while significant, would have to be reconstructed to meet the conditions of our realm of endeavor.

One solution, at least to begin, would be to draw on the books chosen for review in our journal, Educational Studies. Another would be to employ the lists of outstanding books in the Foundations of Education which are published annually in the AESA newsletter. Other means for identifying the Foundations canon would, I feel certain, become available to us.

What we must not lose sight of is the potential value of this Foundational canon in helping us trace the development of the significant ideas through the eyes of the various thinkers who have contributed to it. Bruner seems to concur with the value of such a project when he says that "... it follows from what I have said that the language of education, if it is to be an invitation to reflection and culture creating, cannot be the so-called uncontaminated language of fact and "objectivity." It must express stance and must invite counterstance and in the process leave place for reflection...."[47]

For those faint of heart, who feel that such a project could not come to fruition, one can only say that a number of scholars in the Foundations of Education have, on occasion, approached the task, albeit in sharply restricted ways.[48] It now remains for us to bring efforts of these sorts together in one or two comprehensive volumes for the purpose of providing the field of the Foundations with an instrument which will enable its scholars to engage in the pursuit of what Soltis describes as "... a genuine quest for answers to *perennial questions* (italics added) with the recognition that our answers may not converge and may have to change over time in response to new problems, new insights, and new social contexts. It is why Foundations needs *to help people see the alternatives* (italics added) available for making sense of curriculum and aims, teaching and learning, schooling and society, and professional ethics."[49]

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted in broad outline to address the problem associated with the identification and justification for the inclusion of Foundational knowledge in the preparation of prospective teachers and administrators by suggesting that one means of establishing a firm base from which to argue for the continued inclusion of such a knowledge base in teacher education would be the development of a **Syntopicon of Foundational Knowledge.** Such knowledge, in Soltis' view, "... not only provides the indvidual with empowering perspectives, but also makes possible a community of practitioners who share a fundamental set of interests ... By using their collective experience in making sense of education ... as a professional community they also grow and progress."[50]

Soltis' position is clearly in line with Dewey who argued that "Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge - a common understanding - a likemindedness ...."[51]

Bernstein, as I pointed out earlier, clearly supports the contention that "A true "conversation" - ... presupposes a background of *intersubjective agreements* ...."[52] (italics added) With the construction of

such a **Syntopicon of Foundational Knowledge** we would be able to engage in what Rorty has called "Normal discourse ...any discourse which embodies agreed-upon criteria for reaching agreement; abnormal discourse," he argues, "is any which lacks such criteria."[53]

This paper has been an effort to participate in the national dialogue in which Tozer and his colleagues have invited Foundational scholars around the country to join, a dialogue similar in nature to the sort of dialogue which Hutchins argued was at the root of western civilization, in a search for an understanding of the nature and grounds for our various realms of endeavor. It has been suggesed that syntopical theory would be a viable means, though by no means the only one, for coping with the crisis of justification with which this dialogue is concerned. This dialogue is vital if we are to be successful in sharing, sustaining and continuously communicating the importance of what it is we are about in the preparation of prospective teachers and administrators with significant others, including our pedagogically oriented cohorts within the professional dimension of teacher preparation, including those who contribute to such preparation from the vantage point of the traditional disciplines associated with the arts and sciences, and including those political leaders, agencies, interest groups, and all persons external to university and college environments interested and concerned about the preparation of educational personnel.

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